

## Gauging Nepal's Endeavors to Materialize Trilateralism through China-led BRI

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### **Abstract:**

This article aims to assess whether China-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) provides an opportunity for Nepal to bridge its immediate neighbors, India to the South and China to the North. Analyzing policy coordination, connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bonds as the five pillars of BRI, this article attempts to discover whether they will be of any help to Nepal in materializing Trilateralism, against which India has reservations. But, for Nepal, BRI is the best opportunity not only to diversify her trade, but also to get closely connected with the global value chain. Deeming geopolitical vulnerabilities as the major challenges to Trilateralism, this article recommends to take India into confidence by convincing the southern neighbor that BRI for Nepal is not a strategic partnership with China against India, but solely a resultant of Nepal's aspirations for infrastructure-driven development and growth-oriented prosperity.

**Key Words:** BRI, China, Nepal, India, Trilateralism

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## 1. BACKGROUND:

Apprehending the claim that Nepal's prosperity depends on its geography, economists, development planners, foreign policy experts and the business communities in Nepal often accentuate that Nepal should strive to establish itself as a trade corridor or a transit country between India and China, for its prosperity and development (Bhattarai, 2017, Jan 26). Nepal's proposal of Trilateralism to her immediate neighbors and Nepal's formal entry into China-led Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) in 2017 exemplify such accentuation. While Nepal's lack of access to sea has always been held responsible for its underdevelopment, the signing of the Transit and Transportation Agreement with China in 2016 has altered the conventional identity of Nepal as a landlocked or "India-locked" country. Now, with the signing of the treaty, it is being said that Nepal is land-linked both to the Chinese port of Tianjin and the Indian port of Kolkata. Due to this Nepal is expected to reap the benefits of being a bridge between its two giant neighbors. The transit economy will also help the development of a China-Nepal-India economic corridor (Tao, 2017, Feb 3).

But, India's reluctance in materializing the trilateral partnership has limited trilateralism just to a discourse. It has not been institutionalized. In the 1970s, late King Birendra had put forward the idea of developing Nepal as a gateway between South and Central Asia. Later, in 2005, while addressing the Afro-Asian Summit in Jakarta, former King of Nepal Gyanendra Shah spoke about Nepal's readiness to be an economic transit point between the two Asian economic giants—India and China. Along the same line, Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal made the trilateral proposal during his visit to India in 2010. He again proposed the same during his April 2013 visits to both Beijing and New Delhi. In 2012, former Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai also envisioned Nepal as an 'economic bridge' between China and India. Unlike his predecessors whose emphases on the spirit of trilateral partnership were limited to statements and speeches, prime minister KP Sharma Oli moved a step ahead by signing transit and transportation treaty with China in 2016. Oli's move is perceived as Nepal's initial aspiration to be part of BRI. Oli had signed the treaty in the wake of the 2015 Indian blockade on Nepal. With its signing, Nepal is now in a favorable position to act as a "bridge" between China and India, at least geographically. Along the same lines, incumbent Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal again floated the "bridge" idea during his Goa visit, where he simultaneously met the Chinese President as well as the Indian Prime Minister at the sidelines of the BRICS-BIMSTEC Outreach Summit in October 2016 (Bhattarai, 2017, Jan 26). Albeit China seems positive about the trilateral proposal of Nepal, India appears reluctant owing to its geopolitical sensitivities. Of course, trilateral partnership is the best way for China to get an access to South Asia. Similarly, it will benefit India by giving it access to Tibet. So it is for Nepal to try to convince its neighbors that it does not favor one over the other (Bhattarai, 2017, Jan 26). At the time when India is already reluctant about trilateralism, and hasn't joined BRI, Nepal's formal entry into BRI made India more anxious. Apprehending the same, this article attempts to analyze whether five pillars of BRI (which are policy coordination, connectivity, unimpeded

trade, financial integration, and people-to-people relations) really put Nepal in a favorable position to bridge India and China and propel ahead the spirit of trilateralism.

## 2. POLICY COORDINATION

To cope with challenges brought on by a growing anti-globalization trend at the present, policy coordination is essentially an important pillar of BRI (Yanfei, 2017, May 15). However, political instability in Nepal, its sluggish bureaucracy, politicization of bureaucracy, geopolitical vulnerabilities have generated intricate hindrances to reach into a policy coordination over unimpeded trade and financial integration. They are the bigger challenges for the implementation of BRI projects in Nepal (Thapa, 2018, Jan 3). For instance, five different ministries under the Nepal government have submitted names of 22 projects that could be built under China's BRI, but they have failed to present detailed proposals as directed by the Ministry of Finance (MoF), preventing the country from reaping early benefits from Beijing's ambitious plan to revive the ancient Silk Road to promote trade and support economic integration across Asia, Europe, and Africa (Post Report, 2017, Dec 11). The MoF has so far received names for projects including construction of a rail corridor project, a cross-border transmission line project, two regional airport projects, three irrigation projects, six road projects, two drinking water projects, one disaster management project and six tourism related projects under the BRI. The names of these projects were submitted following the directive issued by Finance Secretary Shankar Prasad Adhikari on November 26 of 2017. But they have not submitted detailed proposals. Meanwhile, the Chinese government is yet to inform the government about investment it intends to make in Nepal to implement projects under the BRI (Post Report, 2017, Dec 11).

To list out the named projects under BRI, Ministry of Energy has proposed 400KV Rasuwagadi-Kerung cross-border transmission line project, while Ministry of Irrigation has proposed Sunkoshi-Marin diversion multipurpose project, Mid-hill tar lift irrigation project, Paanchkhal Valley lift irrigation project, sediment related disaster prevention project and climate change adaptation in surrounding areas of Arniko Highway. Similarly, Ministry of Water Supply and Sanitation has proposed project on groundwater extraction in Chandragiri Valley and Manadev Khola rainwater harvest project (Post Report, 2017, Dec 11). Once these projects are finalized, detailed project reports prepared, and feasibility studies done and are finally implemented, it gives Nepal a chance to learn from construction experience of China, and to improve the capabilities of its human resources. But, if geopolitical threats are not concurrently minimized, there is also a danger of Nepal being caught in a geopolitical game between India and China. This is evident from Nepal taking its time to sign the BRI MoU and sending a deputy prime minister, and not a prime minister, to the BRI summit (Paudyal and Bogati, 2017, Dec 21). Essentially, policy coordination requires ample preparation at diplomatic and political fronts from the Nepalese side to materialize the BRI projects.

### 3. CONNECTIVITY

As an important pillars of BRI (Chance, 2017, Oct 31) connectivity is of prime importance to propel ahead trilateralism. The issues of railways and airways under connectivity have been separately discussed here.

**Railways:** Since the landlocked Nepal has been facing high trading costs, it is believed that with the improved connectivity under BRI, Nepal could lessen the trading cost. At one period of time all three countries—Nepal, India and China—were prosperous and Nepal was a trade route between India and China (Amayta, 2017, Feb 16). For now, Rasuwagadhi-Kerung border point is the only trade and transit point between Nepal and China, which is yet to be upgraded to international standards. China is looking into the possibility of connecting Kathmandu to Lhasa in Tibet via railways at an estimated cost of \$8 billion (Pant, 2017, Dec 27). Kerung border point is expected to connect Nepal with all of South Asia as well as Central Asia via the Qinghai-Tibet rail. Currently, this is the only available route to enter Tibet from Nepal. After the earthquake in 2015, China decided to close the Kodari route, replacing it with this one, but the infrastructure on the Nepal side is very inadequate (Bhusal, 2017, Nov 7).

Under the BRI project, as Nepal and China have agreed to expedite cooperation in the field of cross-border railway connectivity, the dream for China's train to Nepal came further closer after a high-level 35-member Chinese team along with China's National Railway Administration Deputy Chief Zheng Jian visited Rasuwa, Kathmandu, Pokhara and Lumbini, to carry out the preliminary feasibility study of a railway in Nepal in the second week of November of 2017. Based on the preliminary survey, the construction is forecasted to cost NPR 270 billion for the 100 km railway from the Chinese border town of Kerung to Kathmandu (Subedi, 2017, Dec 12). However, as China is all-equipped to extend its Qinghai-Tibet railway up to Nepal border in Kerung by 2020, it's an appropriate time to make inquiries about what Nepal has planned to send back to China, once the train reaches Kerung. Indisputably, the whistling train is expected to be laden with low-priced Chinese goods. But, sending the train empty back to China wouldn't be a rational choice on Nepal's part. A question may arise: why the Chinese train has to go back empty? At first, the list of goods presently exported by Nepal to different parts of the world is really small in terms of quantities. Iron, steel, tea, coffee, spices, knotted carpets, footwear, textiles, plastics, clothing, accessories, handicrafts, beverages and vegetables are some of the goods that Nepal has been exporting up to now. Secondly, whether these goods are competitive enough to meet the demands of consumers in the predominant Chinese markets? If Nepal's exportable goods are largely devoid of competitive eminence in core Chinese markets, then will the aforementioned goods be traded in Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) of China alone? Even historically, Nepal's trade was limited to Tibet. Without understanding the core demands of TAR, dispatching goods indiscriminately from Nepal would not be beneficial (Bhattarai, 2017, March 16). Exporting goods, which are already available in a low price in Tibet, just yields detrimental impacts on Nepal's exports.

**Airways:** By the end of 2017, China connected direct flights with 40 countries involved in Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) including Nepal (Wenqian, 2018, Feb 1). China Southern operates two daily flights on the Kathmandu-Guangzhou route, while China Eastern and Air China operate daily flights linking Kathmandu with Kunming and Lhasa, respectively. Sichuan operates four weekly flights on the Chengdu-Lhasa-Kathmandu sector. Meanwhile, Tibet Airlines also started direct flights between Chengdu and Kathmandu. These flights have enhanced connectivity through people to people relations and tourism.

Also, to further boost up Nepal's connectivity with the outside world, the construction of Pokhara International Airport has started with the Chinese assistance. The project is scheduled to be completed by July 10, 2021. Once the airport is ready for operation, it will have 2,500 meters long and 45 meters wide runway which can handle medium category jets such as Boeing 757 and Airbus 320 (China Daily, 2017, Aug 8). Thereby the burden of Tribhuvan International Airport—the only international airport of Nepal will be extensively reduced.

Moreover, Nepal Airlines Corporation (NAC), the national flag carrier of Nepal took the delivery of all six Chinese-made planes in the February of 2018. In the year 2012, the state-owned NAC airline had signed a commercial agreement with China's AVIC International Aero-Development to procure six aircraft - two 56-seater MA60 and four 17-seater Y-12e. Of them, the NAC had received two MA60 and two Y-12e last year and are conducting domestic flights (Xinhua, 2018, Feb 14).

#### 4. UNIMPEDED TRADE

Albeit BRI is expected to diversify Nepal's trade relations, India is still Nepal's largest market in terms of both exports and imports. About 65 percent of Nepal's total export and 63 percent of total import is with India. Nepal imports more than 60 percent of its goods from India through the Birgunj border point alone, which was completely blocked during the 2015 Indian blockade. But with the signing of the Transit and Transportation agreement with China in 2016, Nepal has now access to Chinese port of Tianjin. Still, diversification of trade and economy doesn't happen overnight. It is a gradual process, which entails policy coordination, good connectivity, financial cooperation and good transport networks. Once connectivity via land is enhanced, and integrated border customs are built, BRI is expected to bring down landlocked Nepal's shipment costs during both exports and imports (Bhattarai, 2017, March 7). Talking about in-land trade with China, Tatopani customs point on the northern border has been blocked since the April 25 earthquake but another customs point on the border with China, Rasuwagadhi, has been opened. But, talking about investment, Indian investment on manufacturing and energy sectors is higher than Chinese investment on energy and service sectors. Remittance brought by seasonal Nepali migrants by utilizing hands at open labour market in India has benefited households from upper parts of far- and mid-west and the Tarai belt. This access is absent in the case of China. It shows that in terms of proximity and cost the Indian market appears more lucrative than the Chinese one. Except for its trade with the

Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), Nepal's foreign trade with third countries has to transit through India. Trade by sea route through India, even with mainland China, is more economical than trade by land route (Nayak, 2016). Nepal's access to Bangladesh seaports via India has been limited due to security factors and availability of poor infrastructure from India side. Nepalese exporters have also made allegations that Nepal-bound goods are required to be security checked at the Rajauli transit point in Bihar, while the consignment is already authorized by customs officials at the Kolkata port (Acharya, 2012). Even at the local trading points, India tries to combat any kind of tendencies that give the message of China-India-Nepal corridor. Although Nepal is considered as the third largest ginger producer at the global level after China and India respectively, India prohibited the import of gingers from Nepal in the September of 2016, citing the reason that Chinese gingers were being exported to India in the name of Nepali merchandise (Bhattarai, 2017, March 16). On the issue of Nepal's request for easing procedures to send money through Indian banks, India appears firm. However, currently, Nepali people need authentication of Indian government officials to open bank accounts in India. Nepalis cannot carry more than INR 25,000 cash while traveling to Nepal from India. Anyone having opened bank accounts there cannot send more than INR 50,000 even through the banking channel (Post Report, 2016, June 30). These hurdles have been weakening the spirit of trilateralism, and probably BRI alone cannot resolve it. Taking India into confidence in the need of the hour to materialize trilateralism through BRI projects.

Extension of Qinghai-Tibet railway to Nepal border by 2020 will be the first endeavor to join Nepal and China with railways. Indeed, on May 12 of 2016, China opened its first rail-and-road service from Lanzhou of Gansu Province in Northwest China to Nepal with an international freight train. The 2,431 kilometers from Lanzhou to Shigatse was covered by the rail transport, while 564 kilometers from Shigatse to Kerung was a road transport. Remaining 160 kilometers from Kerung to Kathmandu was also a road transport. The goods had arrived in Kerung after a week-long journey from Lanzhou. For all of its sea freight imports, Nepal is now not only dependent on Calcutta port of India. In terms of trade and transit, Nepal today has access to Tianjin port of China, along with Calcutta and Vishakhapatnam ports of India. Tianjin Port, is 3,300 km away from the Nepalese border as against the Kolkata port, which is only 1,000 km far. Apprehending the distance from Nepal, and transportation cost it incurs, Calcutta port is considerably the best. But, we need to assess the shipment cost as well. It takes up to 35 days for the shipment of Chinese goods to Nepal via Kolkata port, while it can reach Kathmandu via Kerung in not more than 10 days. In comparison to the Calcutta port, easy accessibility and availability of all global goods at the Tianjin Port—which trades with over 600 ports in 180 countries— is expected to bring down Nepal's shipment costs. Hence, the Chinese train is tangibly a best means of transportation to diversify Nepal's trade relations (Bhattarai, 2017, March 16). Still, cautiousness is prerequisite. Embracing all the Chinese goods imported via the train will simply surge up the cost of Nepal's imports over its exports. Precisely, we shall face the same plight of widening trade deficit that we have with India at present. Hence, what Nepal plans to send back in Chinese train is really important.

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## 5. FINANCIAL INTEGRATION

The March 2015 “Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road,” stated that financial integration is an important underpinning for implementing the Belt and Road Initiative and also offered a long list of options in the financial space, including cross-border economic cooperation zones, bond market development, regulatory coordination, development of new institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Silk Road Fund, and credit rating cooperation( Smits, 2017, Sept 8). For the financial coordination between Nepal and China under BRI framework, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank plays a vital role, which is in itself one of the financial institutions of BRI. AIIB is interested in investing in two infrastructure projects: urban infrastructure development activities in six municipalities of Terai. Under the project, an intensive urban development program will be implemented by selecting projects related to road, sewage, drinking water, renewable energy, bus park, fun park, education and health in Mahendranagar, Dhangadi, Gularia, Nepalgunj, Taulihawa, Siddharthanagar, Parasi, Birgunj, Kalaiya, Gaur, Malangawa, Jaleswor, Janakpurdham, Siraha, Rajbiraj, Inaruwa and Biratnagar( Shrestha, 2016, Nov 26). Also, a cabinet meeting on August 5 of 2017 permitted the Energy Ministry to seek Chinese support to build reservoir projects and transmission lines under the BRI.

In addition, Nepal has sought China’s help to upgrade airports in Dhangadi and Biratnagar, execute urban development projects, and build bus terminals and amusement parks to promote tourism. However, the Chinese government is yet to inform the government about investment it intends to make in Nepal to implement projects under the BRI (Post Report, 2017, Nov 27). As China’s economy achieved a 6.9 per cent growth in 2017 and is expected to generate 30 million jobs this year, Nepal should not delay in taking advantage of BRI to boost competitive trade with China. Nepal should conclude the free trade agreement with China at the earliest and expedite the cross-border infrastructure projects like inland clearance depots, integrated check posts, roadways for the better financial integration through the expansion in volume of trade in a hassle-free manner (Himalayan News Service, 2018, Feb 13). There is the necessity of robust connectivity between the two nations to intensify the economic cooperation through trade, investment, tourism promotion and cultural exchanges for the operational financial coordination. Still, as the part of precaution, the models of financial integration under BRI project also need to be thoroughly studied to get rid of probable debt trap. A recent World Bank report clearly mentions that Nepal needs to invest around 2.5-3.5 percent of its GDP on infrastructure if it is to become a proper developing country by 2030. Financing is tough, which may nonetheless be managed, but other soft things like construction experience, technology and human resources are also missing (Paudyal and Bogati, 2017, Dec 21). Essentially, BRI fulfills that gap for Nepal. Learning from Chinese construction experiences, devising required infrastructure and technology and modernizing human resources are the trails where Nepal shall tread for her anticipated prosperity and development.

## 6. PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE RELATIONS

Generally, interacting with big neighbors by a small nation is a “herculean task”. Although China is a Great Power and Nepal is a small state, the relation between them is however marked by decorum of friendliness, generosity, and cordiality. People-to-People relation between Nepal and China is enriched by the presence of myths, religions, and shared beliefs and also because of the existence of different societies, associations and centers promoting P2P between two countries. The former Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai himself had spoken about “the blood ties between Nepal and China” (Rose, 1971). Nepal shared a greater cultural and economic affinity with Tibet than India until the beginning of the 19th century. There were more Nepalese in Tibet than anywhere else outside Nepal. Prior to the 19th century, strong ethnic and linguistic connections existed between Nepal and Central Asia than between Nepal and South Asia (Bista, 1980). During the Lichhavi period, King Anshuverma and Narendradev expanded cultural and economic relations with Tibet. Bhrikuti (Khribtsun) believed to be the daughter of Amshuverma was married to the Tibetan prince, Thongsong Gampo in the 7th century. Tibetan tradition mentions her as a devout Buddhist who had taken with her many sacred images and expert Newari craftsmen as dowry. Further, diaspora has also played an important role to enhance the P2P relations. The Newari merchants were the early Nepalese visitors in Tibet, who went to Lhasa in the 7th century for the business purpose. Also, the Nepalese people started to travel to Hong Kong in the 1970s as part of the British Army’s Brigade of Gurkhas. The Government of the People’s Republic of China has designated Nepal as one of the tourist destinations since 2001, which has rendered a great potential for Nepal to attract many tourists from China. Today, the number of students learning Chinese language has increased in Kathmandu. Even private schools and private language institutes have started to teach Chinese language. Since the Kathmandu University (KU) collaborated with Confucius Institute, the TU international language campus and other ECAN educational institutes are running the Chinese language classes in Nepal (Shrestha, 2015).

At the P2P level, the belt and road initiatives is expected to uplift peasants, marginalized, proletarians, rural and vulnerable communities through better connectivity and by adhering to the belief of the “Community of Common Destiny,” and intensify interactions among people of different origins, different countries and different continents. The people to people relations existing between Nepal and China is expected to provide headway to trilateralism. Buddhism is one of such strands of interaction that Nepal, India and China share and albeit geographically Himalayas have separated South Asia from China, interactions have taken place in different periods of time which have served to unite the Indian and Sinic /Tibetan civilizations.

## 7. CONCLUSION

From the aforementioned dissection of the five pillars of BRI in Nepal-China bilateral framework, it has been realized that Nepal has not displayed a required level of maturity to implement BRI projects. Policy coordination is missing. The models and mechanisms for



financial coordination also should be identified. Albeit, connectivity has yielded positive results, Nepal needs to be clear about the list of goods that are to be dispatched to China once the Chinese railways arrive to Nepal's borders.

Most importantly, to materialize trilateralism through BRI, Nepal should make attempts to convince India that it's not a strategic partnership with China against India, but entirely an economic cooperation for Nepal's development and prosperity. More precisely, to materialize trilateralism through BRI, the southern neighbor needs to be convinced that partnership with China under BRI doesn't destroy Nepal's 'special' relationship with India. Furthermore, governments in Nepal shouldn't be using BRI projects or trilateral discourses just to protect their regimes back home. Unforgettably, there has been no effort at the political level to make trilateralism work. Apparently, neither does the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) have any such plans. Therefore trilateralism is limited to an idea or a discourse for now. It deserves to be taken more seriously if it is to be materialized through BRI.

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